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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

COMMUNIST ROADNET IN THE LAOS PANHANDLE



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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COMMUNIST ROADNET IN THE LAOS PANHANDLE*

Communist movement of men and supplies overland from North Vietnam to combat areas in South Vietnam depends on an increasingly elaborate network of roads constructed in the panhandle of Laos. The network comprises the principal part of the so-called Ho Chi Minh trail, which bypasses the extremely mountainous terrain characterizing direct movement into South Vietnam and also provides a side door into South Vietnam, thus avoiding the Demilitarized Zone. In the past year the Communists have almost doubled the mileage of the roadnet and have successfully established a continuous north-south route that extends from the Mu Gia Pass southward about 300 miles to the vicinity of the Cambodian border. This enlarged network, over which moves a major part of the logistical needs that the Communist forces in South Vietnam obtain from external sources, is very important to Communist capabilities in South Vietnam. Currently, it assumes increased importance in connection with a possible VC-mounted offensive in the highlands of South Vietnam timed to coincide with the impending southwest monsoon, the summer rainy season.

The main access road from North Vietnam is Route 15, which enters Laos through Mu Gia Pass (see Figure 1). Current estimates indicate an average of about 75 short tons of supplies have moved through this pass daily from December through the first week of April 1966. Prior to this year the main route southward from the pass area extended along Route 23 to the Sipsong Phe (Chapone) area, thence eastward along Route 9 to its junction with Route 92, and finally southward along Route 92 to the area of Ban Bac. A proliferation of tracks and trails led eastward from Route 92 into the highlands of South Vietnam.

New Communist road construction during 1965-66 has extended the network and also provided alternate routes and bypasses. Route 911 now branches from Route 23 about 25 miles south of Mu Gia Pass, providing an alternate and more direct route to the area west of Sipsong Phe. A new road completed 20 March except for a half-mile stretch now connects Route 911 directly with Route 92, bypassing the east-west segment of Route 9. Route 96 extends south from Route 92 to the vicinity of the Cambodian border in the south. Lateral east-west Routes 92E, 165, and 166 extend eastward toward the South Vietnam border from this north-south overland trunk route. Route 100, a new road that extends from Cambodia into Laos, connects with the southern end of Route 96.

An alternative to the Mu Gia Pass entry point, which was bombed by B-52's on 12 April, will be provided by Route 24 between North Vietnamese Route 101 and Laotian Route 911. Part of Route 24 is still under construction. The amount of work required in the continued camouflage tolling of this road (see Figure 2) indicates that the Communists probably have to use it through the summer rainy season. The precise alignment of the road will become extremely difficult to detect from the air as rapidly growing vegetation covers the trails during the rainy season. From the point of view of climate the new road has some marginal advantage over the Mu Gia route in that supplies can be moved overland further south along the coast, which is relatively dry, while the Mu Gia area is receiving the heavy rains of the summer southwest monsoon (see precipitation graphs on map for comparison of rainfall regions). Supplies might also be moved by coastal boat to the North Vietnam port of Quang Khe and forwarded into Laos over the new route, which would greatly reduce overland distances. The major bypasses elsewhere along the roadnet are those that circumvent the original chokepoint (established by aerial bombing) on Route 12 in Laos, somewhat south of the Mu Gia Pass (see inset on map).

Most of the roads are probably single-lane, all-season roads with partially improved surfaces that deteriorate to some extent during the rainy season (see Figure 3). During the last rainy season, June-September 1965, Communist vehicular traffic generally stopped in the Mu Gia Pass area, and supplies were moved southward along Route 23 by porters. Trucks were used to some extent, however, on Route 9 and parts of Routes 92 and 92E during the last rainy season.

Photographic analysis indicates that the truck route from 911 south to the Cambodian border may be an all-weather route to the South Vietnam border that can be used by the Communists during the coming rainy season. The alignment generally follows higher ground that probably will not be flooded. Reportedly, some sections of this route are constructed with rock aggregate or corduroy. After the onset of the impending monsoon season, however, some of the route may revert to stretches of only fair-weather road, in spite of the improvements. Most of the route is aligned through an area that has very heavy rainfall; the area of component Routes 92 and 92E receives an annual rainfall of 120 to 140 inches. By comparison, the Route 23 area probably receives 100 inches of rainfall annually, and during the 1965 summer rainy season this route was impassable to vehicular traffic.

* This report was prepared in the Office of Route Intelligence. The alignment of the Communist roadnet on the map is based on an NVIC briefing board dated April 1966.

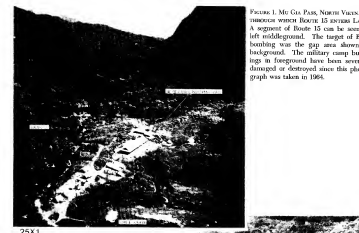
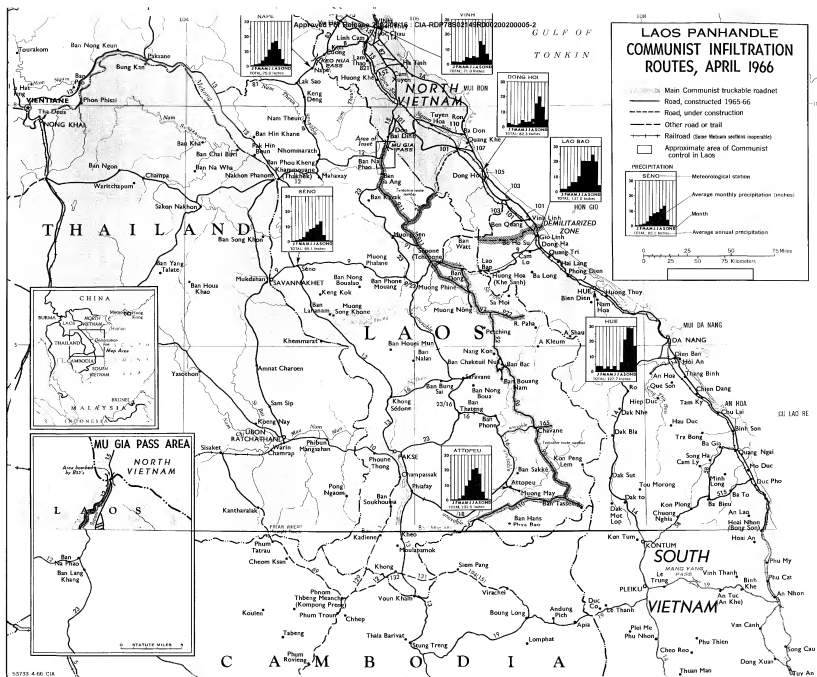


FIGURE 1. Mu Gia Pass, North Vietnam, monsoon season. Route 15 enters Laos. A segment of Route 12 can be seen in left foreground. The target of B-52 bombing was the gap area shown in background. The military camp built-up in foreground has been severely damaged or destroyed since this photograph was taken in 1965.



FIGURE 2. Partially completed road, showing steep, rocky incline, and a military camp in the background. The road surface is being built over much of the new road, Route 91, that will connect North Vietnam Route 101 and Laos Route 911. During the impending rainy season, fast-growing vines will completely cover these inclines and make detection of the road almost impossible.

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